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ABSTRACT

Passive-aggressive behavior in an emotionally disturbed child affects the child's progress and affects peer interactions in classroom settings. Passive-aggressive personalities are typically helpless, dependent, impulsive, overly anxious, poorly oriented to reality, and procrastinating. The characteristics of passive-aggressive children need to be addressed in the classroom to enable the teacher to treat the disorder and effectively manage the classroom. A suggested approach to classroom behavior management is the psychoeducational model, which emphasizes intrapersonal development and an atmosphere of understanding and cooperation, to help the child become more independent while learning to accept decisions from those in authority. The review of the literature focuses on: (1) causes of the passive-aggressive personality; (2) tactics used by the passive-aggressive child to control the classroom environment, such as selective vision, selective hearing, slow-down tactics, losing objects, the destructive volunteer tactic, etc.; (3) failure of such children to develop satisfying personal relationships; (4) their lack of self-esteem; and (5) techniques for teaching passive-aggressive children, through encouragement and support for task completion, use of token systems, cooperative learning techniques, assertiveness training, and pairing of a passive-aggressive child with a normal child to reinforce social and academic skills. (JDD)

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HOW PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR IN
EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED CHILDREN AFFECTS PEER
INTERACTIONS IN A CLASSROOM SETTING

Janet Hardt

April 26, 1988

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author has a Master of Science degree in special education from Dominican College in San Rafael. She is currently working to obtain her California Teachers Multiple Subject Credential, Severely Handicap Credential, and Learning Handicap Credential. She has had extensive experience in working with children and adults with severe developmental disabilities. The author has always seen herself as a teacher. After experiencing the handicapped population as a camp counselor in high school, she broadened her interests, realizing that she could contribute to the education of special young people. Her early recollections of personal experiences with adults and their negativity towards learning disabled children have given her the necessary reinforcement to pursue this career in aiding the learning and emotional development of handicapped children.

INTRODUCTION

Most adults see childhood as a happy, carefree time of life. As adults, it is important

to understand that this time of life is confusing and full of anxiety to many children. These feelings create many types of behavior patterns. The best teachers are those who can understand children's feelings, help them deal with the reality of childhood, and work with the various types of personalities that emerge in the classroom. A classroom setting contains various types of personalities, among them may be children with passive-aggressive behavior tendencies. Such children may have difficulty maintaining appropriate peer-interactions. These behaviors affect a child's progress and development in the classroom.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

How does passive-aggressive behavior in emotionally disturbed children affect peer interactions in a classroom setting? Passive-aggressive personalities are characterized by helplessness, clinging dependency, and procrastination. The term, passive-aggressive, is confusing because the title itself is conflicting. How can one be passive and aggressive at the same time? The apparent passivity is designed to gain

attention and affection, to avoid responsibility, or to control or punish others covertly. Frequently, individuals with this disorder agree to perform a task and then proceed to subtly undermine its completion with complaints and passive obstructionism. The goal of the passive behaviors is to make others so uncomfortable that they will take care of the passive person (White, 1984). They may be provocative and argumentative, especially with those in authority (Berkow, 1987). The passive-aggressive personality disorder is listed in the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (1980) as one of eleven specific types of personality disorders. The following criteria are required in order to make the diagnosis:

- A. There is a resistance to demands for adequate activity or performance in both occupational and social areas of functioning.
- B. The resistance is expressed indirectly through at least two of the following: 1) procrastination; 2) dawdling; 3) stubbornness; 4) intentional inefficiency; 5) forgetfulness.
- C. As a consequence of A and B there is pervasive and long-standing social or occupational ineffectiveness (including roles of housewife or student); e.g., intentional inefficiency has prevented job promotion.

D. Persistence of the behavior pattern even under circumstances in which more self-assertive and effective behavior is possible.

E. Does not meet the criteria for any other personality disorder, and if under 18, does not meet the criteria for Oppositional Disorder.

A child is considered emotionally disturbed when the behavior of the child is so inappropriate that class members are affected. The teacher may experience a high degree of stress. This behavior pattern interferes with the child's ability to learn, work with others, and make choices. These children have a tendency to develop stomach aches or headaches which are often psychosomatic symptoms resulting from stress caused by trying to hide their learning problems (Kay, 1986). Immature behavior is also common. These children behave differently in a way that has a detrimental effect on their academic progress, progress of others in the classroom, and interpersonal relationships. They are not developing in a typical pattern of learning compared to their non-handicapped peer group. There is an inability to learn which cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors (Hallahan & Kaufman, 1982). Schulz,

Hirshoren, Manton, and Henderson (1971) have reported the prevalence estimates of emotionally disturbed children ranging from 0.05 percent to 15 percent in various states across the nation. Morse (1975) has reviewed surveys indicating that anywhere from 0.1 to 30 percent of the children screened could be considered disturbed, depending on the age of the children and the criteria used to define emotional disturbance.

Peer interactions are represented as the way in which children work and play with each other. These interactions are important for children to experience to establish a foundation of self-worth and confidence.

For the purposes of this paper, the classroom is a self-contained special day class. It is an average special day class with eight to twelve students, an instructional aide, and a teacher. Typically, the students are male and the teacher is female.

RATIONALE

The characteristics of passive-aggressive children need to be addressed in the classroom because teacher awareness is critical in treating

this disorder and in establishing classroom management. An effective approach to classroom behavior management is the psychoeducational model (McDowell, Adamson, & Wood, 1982). It emphasizes an intervention process that stresses intrapersonal development in emotionally disturbed students. The psychoeducational approach is primarily concerned with the mental health of students and emphasizing the inner psychological processes. How the teacher uses power has a significant influence on promoting a positive or negative classroom environment. A balance between establishing classroom goals and individual student needs is also important in the classroom setting. The teacher needs to be aware of peer groups and the varying interaction of students among and within the groups. The teacher who demands that interaction conforms to their expectations without understanding peer groups may be inviting a negative classroom environment. The teacher must develop an atmosphere of understanding and cooperation rather than of control and competition. Such awareness enables the teacher to extinguish such behavior from

progressing. By approaching these needs, the teacher and child can work toward preparing the child for mainstreaming. This will assist the child to be more independent while learning to accept decisions from those in authority.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Where does the passive-aggressive personality start? Does it begin with behavior that distances the child from others or with an environment that is inappropriate for a child? There does not seem to be one concrete answer to these questions, but possibly a combination of many.

According to Hallahan and Kauffman (1982), the problem arises because the social interactions and transactions between the child and the social environment are inappropriate. On the other hand, Berres and Long (1979), support the theory that the passive-aggressive child is formed at a very early age and is most frequently promoted by successful middle-class parents. The parents have worked hard for what they have achieved and obviously want the best for their children. For these children to be well liked and

successful in school, they need to be "good" children. These children are taught that "good children" are never hostile or sarcastic. They should have nice thoughts and behavior. Consequently, some children deny themselves the normal feelings of anger and frustration and become passive-aggressive.

While observing adult passive-aggressive personality types, White (1984) found that three features emerge. First, is the extreme distance that is experienced from one parenting figure, usually the father. Subjects of the study felt that the father was emotionally cold and unfeeling. The second feature is the extent to which the subjects viewed themselves as an object. While growing up, these people did not feel as though they were part of a family unit. The third feature is their sense of specialness. The mother focused on the child as a prized object. The mother was totally involved with the infant to the exclusion of everything else. The mothers had put their lives on hold to an extreme (White, 1984).

Small, Small, Allig, and Moore (1970) present data from a 7 to 15 year follow up study

of 100 patients hospitalized with a diagnoses of passive-aggressive personality disorder, who were compared with 50 patients with other psychiatric disorders. The control group was individually matched with the subjects for age, sex, educational status, and quarter year of admission to the hospital. No test information regarding reliability and validity was reported. The researchers employed systematic methods of chart and interview data collection. The researchers did not attempt to quantify and analyze all of the clinical data collected. The focus was aimed at "...those features that were most common to a cohort assembled only on the basis of an ambiguous clinical diagnoses assigned many years ago" (Small, 1970, pg. 103). They sought to discover whether or not the passive-aggressive diagnostic label represented an illness or disease entity with a typical clinical profile, course, and outcome.

The findings of the study indicate that the passive-aggressive patients showed to have positive characteristic traits that did not seem to be found in other psychiatric syndromes.

Although each patient's background differed, it was found that most of the patients developed emotional disturbances during adolescence, which was accompanied by a family background of alcoholism. This illness is as likely to occur in males as in females. It is possible that environmental factors could be influential in the course of the disease (Small, 1970; Whitman 1954). The follow-up studies showed that the illness for most of the patients was periodically disabling. Most of the patients spent little time in psychiatric hospitals over the years, although those who made the most improvements received psychotherapy on an outpatient basis. It was also shown that there was a failure of social learning, disturbed interpersonal relationships, and persisting maladaptive behavior. In the entire study, only 9 persons were judged to have completely recovered. A weakness to the study, though no fault of the researchers, was the uncooperative efforts of the subjects. They often failed to keep appointments, refused to return questionnaires, or would agree to participate in examinations and then back out at the last minute.

Although this study is not current, it contains longitudinal results that are pertinent to the treatment of passive-aggressive personalities today.

Cole (1984) explains that passive-aggressiveness is induced; it is not an inherent trait. She feels that passive-aggressive behavior is induced by the "Power Struggle Game." This game is played by people in authority, such as parents, therapists, teachers, or bosses who are trying to get other people to make changes supposedly for their own good. If the Game is played between parents and children, the children can develop passive-aggressive traits or passive-aggressive personalities. This is accomplished by trying to get a child to complete a chore, such as making a bed. It is handled in a way that is counter-productive, such as a command with an implied threat attached. Other ways of promoting passive-aggressive behavior are nagging, using sarcastic or negative tones of voice, or making unreasonable demands. A situation is set up where the child will not or cannot refuse a demand. The child's natural

response to feeling forced to comply is to be angry. He is not aware of his anger because he was taught that "good" children do not show their anger (White, 1984). The child then shows his anger indirectly by sabotaging the adult, parent, or teacher. This series of games ultimately produces a serious negative effect on the child's self-concept and self-esteem.

In the classroom, the passive-aggressive child uses many tactics that are apt to drive any teacher crazy. Berres and Long (1979) have been able to identify and document the six most common passive-aggressive tactics that are used in the classroom:

1. Selective Vision:

At recess, the teacher asks a passive-aggressive child to retrieve the ball from the bushes. The child does not want to do it but agrees to anyway. He pokes through the bushes but can not find it. Finally, the teacher must find the ball and shows annoyance toward the child. The child looks surprised at the finding and says, "Gosh, I can't believe you found it!"

2. Selective Hearing:

Like selective vision, a passive-aggressive child's hearing dissolves when he is asked to do something he would rather not do. For example, the passive-aggressive child is asked to close the drapes for a movie.

The child does not respond. After a few more attempts at asking the child, the teacher finally raises her voice. The child replies in a kind tone, "Why are you so upset? I didn't hear you the first time".

3. Slow Down Tactics:

Many passive-aggressive children take a very long time to get from one place to another or to complete a task. They are always saying they are coming but never do until the teacher is on the verge of hysterics. The child finds one more task to complete, for example, tying a shoe, picking up trash, or putting something away before complying with the teacher's request. This tactic is a hostile way of controlling the situation by upsetting others.

4. Losing Objects:

Another form of passive-aggressive anger is that some children continually leave their possessions everywhere but in the right place. Consequently, the teacher is always picking up after the child or nagging at him. Again, it is psychologically gratifying for the child to see the teacher become so upset.

5. The Destructive Volunteer Tactic:

When some passive-aggressive children volunteer to help the teacher, they create a path of destruction along the way so that the teacher can't help but not want the assistance of that child again.

6. Don't Ask Me For Help:

The passive-aggressive child asks for help with a problem, and then makes it impossible for the teacher to give it. This is accomplished by toe tapping, humming, staring at the ceiling, or playing with a pencil. The teacher may become so frustrated

with the uncooperative child that she will walk away in anger.

Passive-aggressive children effectively express their anger indirectly while appearing to be proper, polite, sorry, and confused by the teacher's behavior. (Berres & Long, 1979). Not only is the teacher-child relationship affected by this behavior but so is the peer relationship. Most passive-aggressive children prefer solitary play. Not needing others and looking down on others is a strong family theme (White, 1984). The behavior passive-aggressive children exhibit prevents social interaction and the development of satisfying personal relationships.

We, as educators, need to recognize the signs of passive-aggressive behavior in children and try to teach these children how to function appropriately in social settings. If we are to help a child, we need to examine the interaction between the child's behavior and the behavior of other people in the classroom environment.

The largest problem the child has is lack of self-esteem. He does not really know what his capabilities are and he, as well as adults and peers around him, underestimate him.

He is overly dependent in his relationships with others because he does not realize that he is capable of taking care of himself (Cole, 1984). To successfully teach passive-aggressive children, the teacher must give encouragement and support to students for performing and completing tasks. Positive comments from the teacher will often make the child aware of his self-defeating behavior (Drye, 1974). It is important to model behavior of being wrong and admitting to it to show that it is alright to be wrong.

Passive-aggressive children need to permit themselves to have and show feelings. By experiencing such feelings and behaviors, passive-aggressive children will grow into stronger, stable adults and develop positive self-concepts. White (1984) lists eleven 'permissions' that passive-aggressive personalities should be aware of:

1. You can think and solve problems.
2. You can succeed.
3. You can enjoy your successes.
4. You can be aware of your own feelings.
5. You can like other people.
6. You can let other people like you.
7. You can maintain your own boundaries.

8. You can express your needs many ways.
9. You can grow up and take care of yourself.
10. You belong to yourself.
11. You are a feeling human being.

Classroom peers can serve as powerful sources of reinforcement in increasing or maintaining positive and negative behaviors of their classmates (Smith & Fowler, 1984). Desirable behaviors such as social skills and academic skills can be reinforced. By pairing a passive-aggressive child with a non-passive-aggressive child, modeling can occur as well as the opportunity for socialization. Undesirable aspects may be disruption, noncompliance, fighting, or complaining (Christy, 1975). Peers are also able to provide positive reinforcement in more settings than the teacher, such as the cafeteria, recess, and hallways.

The study by Smith and Fowler (1984) examined, in two experiments, the effectiveness of a peer-monitored token system on reducing disruption and non-participation during a kindergarten class for behaviorally impaired children. No test information regarding reliability was reported. The testing tool used

was observation and a checklist data. The data was taken daily to assess the children's performance in activities. Results in Experiment 1 suggest that to decrease disruption and increase participation, both teacher and peer-monitored interventions were successful. Experiment 2 further demonstrated that peers could initiate the token system without adult implementation. In both experiments, it was shown that peers consistently awarded points that were earned. However, the peer monitors frequently awarded points that were not earned due to undesirable behavior. A weakness to the implementation of this study may be the importance of withholding points in relation to awarding points, which was not analyzed. A strength of this study is the cautionary measures taken by the researchers to assure that children did not use the point system in a punitive way. This was accomplished by modeling appropriate techniques. Throughout the study, a teacher was available to intervene if a teammate disagreed with the team captain's point awards.

Attempts at cooperative learning techniques may prove successful with passive-aggressive children. Using this strategy, teachers structure the class so that students work together to achieve a shared academic goal. Students are accountable for not only their own achievement, but also the performance of other group members, since the group's evaluation is based on its product (Schniedewind & Salend, 1987). Cooperative learning is effective with heterogeneous populations because it encourages liking and learning among students of various academic abilities, gender, handicapping conditions and racial and ethnic backgrounds.

It is suggested by Perry and Flannery (1982) that assertiveness training may be effective when working with passive-aggressive personalities. When being assertive, it is important to express anger and frustration in firm but tactful ways as well as being tender and affectionate. It is important to channel the child's anger away from resistance into productive learning. A nurturing approach is very effective, since any show of power will turn them off.

Research conducted by Diener and Dweck (1978) showed that helpless children attributed their failure to lack of ability, while mastery-oriented children engaged in self-monitoring and self-instruction. They observed that helpless children reflect upon the cause of their failure but spend little time in trying to mend their mistake, while mastery-oriented children seem to try to find the solution of their mistake. Another component to effective instruction then, would be assisting the passive-aggressive child in becoming mastery-oriented. Three ways to help children become mastery-oriented are to help children understand themselves, discover ways to make learning easier, and to look at the strategies they are using to see how they are working.

Berres and Long (1979) provide a list of management techniques that may assist the teacher of a passive-aggressive student:

1. Understand that a passive-aggressive pupil can create in the teacher these same feelings and behaviors
2. Understand that the goal of the passive-aggressive child is to get the teacher to be out-of-control so she will act in wild and crazy ways

3. Understand that all of the passive-aggressive tactics are inappropriate ways of expressing anger
4. Decode the passive-aggressive pupil's behavior by using the 'Detective Columbo' technique of wondering out loud why the pupil is using this passive-aggressive tactic
5. The teacher can meet with the pupil and share her concerns about his behavior. Since the pupil will deny his anger, the teacher can arrange for a personal signal such as pointing to her ear when she feels he is being passive-aggressive
6. Hold general discussions in which the teacher gets the group to talk about how they handle their feelings of anger. It is important to emphasize how normal and acceptable it is to have these feelings and how satisfying it is to talk about them rather than act them out
7. Recognize that this pupil has internalized this technique as a way of life and refer him to your school psychologist
8. Finally, evaluate your manner of accepting and showing anger to make sure you are not modeling a passive-aggressive style.

CONCLUSION

In many classrooms, passive-aggressive tendencies are recognizable in school-age children. Teachers may identify these tendencies by the student who is impulsive, overly anxious, poorly oriented to reality, dependent, and helpless. Teachers who can understand and deal with the variety of personalities in a classroom

are best suited to handle the conflicts that arise from this challenge. When teachers incorporate a variety of teaching techniques, such as modeling, peer reinforcement, cooperative learning, and referral to a school psychologist, it enables the teacher to extinguish passive-aggressive behavior from progressing into adulthood. The longer the behavior is manifested, the harder it will be to conquer. If this behavior carries into adulthood, it may affect adult relationships as well as job performance.

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